William Dobell, Sir Biography

William Dobell, Sir

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Biography

The Australian artist Sir William Dobell (1899-1970) was one of the world's leading modern portraitists. His best portraits revealed extraordinary psychological insight.

William Dobell was born in Newcastle, New South Wales, on Sept. 24, 1899. He moved to Sydney in 1925 to study at the Julian Ashton Art School. In 1929 he went to London on a traveling scholarship to study at the Slade School, where he won prizes for draftsmanship and painting. Later he exhibited at the Royal Academy and before the New English Group.

Dobell returned to Sydney in 1939. He maintained a subjective approach to painting, and his work was very different from that of current Australian styles. In 1943 he won the Archibald Prize, Australia's principal award for portraiture, for a painting of fellow-artist Joshua Smith. The award was immediately challenged on the grounds that Dobell's entry showed a degree of distortion which made it a caricature rather than a true portrait, but the court upheld the judging panel's decision. Resultant newspaper publicity greatly expanded interest in Dobell's work, but as a result of the controversy Dobell withdrew to Wangi, a small coastal town north of Sydney, and became a shy and enigmatic figure.

Gentle by nature, Dobell was also shrewd, warm, and strong in feeling, and these characteristics shone through his work. He was intensely interested in his fellowman. He achieved some of his effects by deft underscoring of aspects that typified the subject's character, and others by sharp delineation of exciting and unusual features of the subject.

Dobell was also a notable landscapist. He painted local scenes, views of Southeast Asia, and a series of cameos capturing the strangeness of New Guinea. He belonged to no school but acknowledged inspiration from Rembrandt, William Hogarth, Pierre Auguste Renoir, and Chaim Soutine.

Dobell gained numerous significant awards and received many commissions, among them four for portraits for use as *Time* magazine cover subjects, including one of Australian prime minister Robert Menzies in 1960. Exhibitions of his work attracted exceptionally widespread attendance; and a sale in Sydney in 1962 realized record prices for an Australian artist. He was knighted in 1966 and died in Wangi on May 14, 1970.